Pursuing Effective and Conflict-Aware Stabilization
Partnering for Success

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THE ISSUE

■ Future stabilization efforts must take lessons from prior experience without being encumbered by them. Institutional and political aversion to large-scale and military-dominated stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan provides important lessons, but a selective and targeted approach to stabilization holds promise for future endeavors.

■ Stabilization success depends upon partnerships across the local, U.S. interagency, and international levels that share the burden and leverage comparative strengths. This requires robust mapping of relative power, relationships, and resourcing before and throughout the stabilization process.

■ Reforms to stabilization tools, authorities, and resourcing will be critical to pursuing a more agile, selective, and targeted approach to stabilization.

BUILDING UPON THE STABILIZATION ASSISTANCE REVIEW

The U.S. government has an opportunity to pursue effective and conflict-aware stabilization, building upon the U.S. Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) framework signed in June 2018. The SAR clarified roles and streamlined priorities for stabilization assistance, though “implementation will require sustained leadership, an interagency roadmap, new processes, bureaucratic incentives, and a review of authorities and resources.” The SAR includes a unified U.S. government definition of stabilization that recognizes stabilization 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.”

CSIS has embarked on a study to examine how to operationalize and build upon the SAR framework. This brief serves as a companion to a brief published in January 2019 which called for a clearer and contextualized definition of stabilization success and well-delineated roles, goals, and leadership structures in the U.S. interagency. It emphasized the importance of local actors and called for a process-based approach to assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E). This brief builds on the first by focusing on the lessons learned from past stabilization efforts and by addressing a key element of successful SAR implementation: partnerships. Success requires deeper interagency coordination and substantive partnerships with international partners. Lastly, this brief addresses a fundamental challenge to SAR implementation: updating the U.S. government’s tools, authorities, and resourcing to increase chances of success.
LESSONS LEARNED FROM PAST U.S. STABILIZATION EFFORTS

Past stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in significant skepticism and aversion to undertaking similar large-scale, U.S.-led efforts perceived to be “nation building.” They did, however, provide important lessons, many of which ostensibly helped shape the SAR, that should be considered as part of future U.S. stabilization efforts. An important lesson from these experiences is to avoid launching stabilization efforts as an afterthought to short-term military and counterterrorism priorities and realizing that stabilization often requires longer-term commitments. Stabilization should be part of early strategic planning efforts. Another lesson is the importance of clarity and transparency in stabilization efforts, which should provide clear objectives, expectations, and delineation of responsibilities. Finally, past efforts have shown the value of setting targeted, realistic, and achievable governance, security, and development goals developed with local buy-in, interagency coordination, and optimization of effort across relevant domestic and international stabilization actors. While often difficult, alignment and partnership within the U.S. interagency, implementing partners, and among allied and partner institutions is critical to stabilization success.

POLICYMAKERS, IMPLEMENTERS, AND BRIDGING DIVIDES

The SAR provides a framework for U.S. government actors to have positive, stabilizing effects in fragile and contested states. To operationalize this framework, policymakers and implementers must understand and address the challenges to bridging the bureaucratic divides that may be inhibiting progress. This will require unprecedented interagency cooperation and greater cohesion between those at the policy, field, and implementation levels.

DEFINING STRATEGIES WITH FLEXIBILITY IN MIND

The SAR points out that 86 percent of surveyed U.S. government experts were unclear about the division of labor between U.S. government agencies on stabilization. Now that the interagency framework is in place, it is important for U.S. policymakers to define higher-level strategies and goals. The global balance of power is shifting and increased strategic competition has emerged as a challenge to the security and prosperity of the United States and its allies. Increased efforts by countries like China, Russia, and Iran to gain an advantage and fill real or perceived gaps in the “gray zones” that exist so often in fragile states has increased pressure to deliver results in stabilization contexts. Overarching goals and strategies should be updated to reflect these new geopolitical realities. This includes tying stabilization planning and processes to strategies for fragile states and, within DoD, to irregular warfare approaches.

Strategies should also acknowledge—as the SAR does—the non-linearity of conflict, whereby “continued gains are by no means guaranteed” and flexibility and context-specific adaptation are required. Current U.S. government contracting mechanisms rarely allow implementers the ability to flexibly respond to realities on the ground. At USAID (the primary implementing agency for stabilization as designated by the SAR), contracting officers are often geographically removed from the specific country or regional context and are almost always over-burdened with too many projects on which to provide oversight. This results in technical officers taking more active roles in oversight and strategic direction while not having the authorities to approve changes based on field realities.

The same challenges exist in tactical decisionmaking, for example on sub-contract and travel approvals. U.S. policymakers should consider delegating as much decision-making as possible to the country team or to technical officers to increase the agility of the stabilization response.

[Operationalizing the SAR framework] will require unprecedented interagency cooperation and greater cohesion between those at the policy, field, and implementation levels.

Hiring and posting more contracting officers in the field—or at least within regions—would give them a more direct understanding of these risks, which is important for their decision-making process. Creating more flexibility in stabilization programming is not without risk, especially with the existence of accountability review boards (ARBs). Career bureaucrats have, at times, seen the careers of peers negatively affected by the results of ARBs, which define success based on metrics that allow no margin for failure in a field that must allow for innovation and failures on a demonstrated pathway to success. These structural factors contribute to increased levels of risk aversion among policymakers. Additionally, mid-stream, programmatic changes could result in innovation, but they could also fail to produce the desired results. Strategies should allow for some
ability for those in stabilization contexts to test and assess, then scale or rethink. Strategies—or at least implementation plans based on higher-level strategies—should be driven by those working in the stabilization context, with significant input at the design and implementation stages from international partners and implementers.

**THE ROLE OF THE IMPLEMENTER**

The SAR provides a solid framework for interagency cooperation on stabilization; however, it does not fully acknowledge the important role played by the people, organizations, and contractors implementing stabilization assistance. Implementers are often the ones in most direct contact with the local actors who are critical to the success of any stabilization effort. They understand local needs and should be included in future strategy development efforts. Whereas U.S. government employees often rotate out of stabilization contexts on yearly—or even shorter—timelines, many implementers work on the same countries or regions for years, decades, or entire careers. Incorporating priorities of local governments and civilians should be built into the U.S. government strategy development process; oftentimes implementers have the most regular access to these people, especially outside of capital cities. Implementers, in turn, must take care to avoid broad contextual generalizations based on interactions with a few local actors and staff, often the English-speaking, elite, or most vocal. In providing input into strategies, implementers should reflect nuanced and contextually-informed perspectives.

**DEMAND-DRIVEN VERSUS MISSION-DRIVEN**

Building trust and having productive relationships with locally legitimate partners is critical to stabilization operations. Stability is an inherently political phenomenon whereby local actors—politicians, bureaucrats, and civil society and even non-state actors—have much to gain from effective and conflict-aware operationalization of the SAR. Nevertheless, stabilization assistance has never been administered in the absence of U.S. strategic interests. There is a natural and inherent tension between any strategy developed only with U.S. strategic interests in mind and those only focused on the priorities of local actors and communities. However, there is often significant convergence between the two such that effective strategies can be developed with both in mind. Efforts should be taken to develop a foundation of trust between locally-legitimate actors (which can change throughout the course of a project or broader stabilization effort) and those executing U.S. stabilization assistance built on these shared values, interests, and goals.¹¹

**BRIDGING THE DIVIDES**

Within the U.S. government there are bureaucratic forces at play that, without resolution, could slow or stall effective operationalization of the SAR. A core issue is the timely prioritization of stabilization as a policy, assistance, and defense priority within specific country contexts. Many countries must manage multiple and sometimes competing priorities. The departments and agency should establish systems and processes that facilitate conversations to share analysis and enable a process through which stabilization can be identified as a priority. However, complicating this ability to prioritize stabilization in a timely manner is a potential division between regional and functional players. While the challenges differ at DoD, USAID, and DoS, they are most acutely felt within DoS. Though the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) and the U.S. Office of

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* Iraqi men unload humanitarian aid supplies provided by the U.S. development agency USAID to displaced Iraqis who have fled clashes between Islamic State group jihadists and Peshmerga fighters. Source: MARWAN IBRAHIM/AFP/Getty Images
Foreign Assistance Resources (F) have leadership roles in SAR implementation, U.S. ambassadors—who have ultimate authority over field execution stabilization efforts—report and advance their careers through the regional structure at DoS. A similar, though perhaps less acute, phenomenon exists between USAID mission directors in the field who report through regional bureaus, OTI, and other parts of the agency tasked with the operationalization of the SAR. To address this, USAID has made the decision to create a Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization that will take the lead technical role on stabilization for USAID, working to support efforts across the agency.

Further complicating matters is the fact that stabilization country teams can and do adapt to local structural realities. It is hard for Washington-based counterparts tasked with the operationalization of the SAR to be similarly nimble; thus, lines of communication between the field (often focused on hyper-local issues) and Washington (focused at the policy level) can become muddled or blurred, especially after going through multiple layers of review. It is critical for DoS, USAID, and DoD to build strong lines of communication and feedback loops not only with the field but also within and across each of the departments and the agency.

The divides discussed above are most acutely manifested during the process of determining stabilization leadership structures. While the U.S. ambassador has ultimate authority in most cases, the makeup of the day-to-day operational team and leadership structure (both of which could be drawn from personnel already in country in many cases) is critical to the effort’s success. Those charged with the implementation of stabilization priorities should offer country teams updated capabilities matching the complexity of the given context. These teams should be built on a context-specific basis, but since stabilization contexts often require quick mobilization and action, it is worth establishing broad guidelines. The U.S. government team should integrate with existing assets on the ground, especially those within the U.S. embassy. Under the authority of—and tasked with close coordination with—the U.S. ambassador, it is critical that the stabilization team has a single leader. As part of DoS’s leadership of SAR implementation, CSO could then serve as the liaison between the leader within the embassy and Washington-based interagency stakeholders to ensure a streamlined approach, informed by rigorous and conflict-aware analysis that would establish stabilization as a priority, promote unity of purpose, and facilitate integrated design of stabilization efforts. In cases where stabilization is occurring in a region without the permission of the central government, or where the United States lacks an embassy, the civilian reporting “chain of command” should be clear, even if the stabilization resourcing platform is dispersed across perimeter countries (as in the case of northeast Syria).

Bridging these divides will take committed political leadership and effective policies to institutionalize change throughout the departments and the agency. A good first step would be to incorporate more modules on conflict analysis and stabilization planning that could be delivered as part of core training curriculums in an interagency format across DoS and USAID, including to stabilization-focused civil servants in DoD. Such training would require additional resources to develop and deliver meaningful content on a regular basis. Those responsible for operationalizing the SAR in the field and at the policy level should conduct joint, scenario-based planning exercises, even during initial phases of SAR implementation. These exercises should be used to bridge the divide while also addressing key operational questions. For example, are there actors that have demonstrated an ability to provide stability or security? Who are the actors that communities support and why? Are policy objectives in alignment with what locally-legitimate actors are able and interested in supporting? Exercises and training for stabilization should also consider that the focus on power elites will further alienate marginalized groups, which could manifest in governance and security challenges detrimental to stabilization goals. In addition, the legitimacy of the elites the United States is engaging with may shift over time. Developing mechanisms for inclusivity and an emphasis on power mapping rather than personality mapping will be important for teaching how to achieve enduring impact. Continually reassessing these and other questions and tweaking strategies accordingly will build trust and bridge divides while providing critical strategic direction to stabilization efforts. Co-deployment of civilian and military personnel is another productive way to ensure interagency coordination and integration, though differing approaches to risk and strategic objectives across the U.S. government often creates hurdles to implementation.

**STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND ELIMINATING DISCONNECTS**

Effective partnerships require common objectives and approaches. At the very least, partners in stabilization contexts must avoid having contradictory strategies. At best, these strategies are coordinated and executed in such a way that shares the burden and best utilizes each partner’s relative strengths.
SHARING THE BURDEN WITH INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

The United States is a significant contributor to—and provides senior leadership of—almost all multilateral institutions that engage in stabilization contexts. However, the United States finds itself at an inflection point whereby previous assumptions of U.S. leadership in all stabilization contexts are being challenged by an increased focus on burden sharing. The combination of lingering self-perceptions of American superiority, “being burned” by unsatisfactory outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and political and fiscal pressures at home complicate the U.S. role abroad.” At the same time, the UN and the World Bank are actively enhancing their respective and joint peacebuilding architectures, which the United States should participate in and learn from, adding the U.S. perspective on stabilization throughout. In addition, the United Kingdom and Germany have recently refreshed their own strategies and organization for stabilization, from which the United States could learn. Early coordination with these multinational entities and bilateral partners will not only help avoid duplication but will identify comparative advantages for engagement. When addressing how, when, and where to share burdens, the United States and its international partners should focus on how joint—or at least deconflicted—efforts are mutually reinforcing and expand the collective ability to respond to challenges, especially in places where competition with Russia, China, and Iran exists. These discussions should happen as early in the U.S. government’s strategic planning as possible, ideally shortly after the stakeholder mapping exercise described above. This way international partner strategies and ongoing activities can be incorporated into U.S. government stabilization planning.

Many partnership discussions begin organically and informally in the field. More platforms for these interactions are needed, utilizing the comparative strengths and convening power of the United States and its international partners. These field efforts should be relayed to the appropriate policymakers who can support these field efforts to burden share by providing policy cover. However, even with the best combined planning between the United States and its range of partners, a common understanding of stabilization may remain elusive due to political, programmatic, or other constraints. Given this dilemma, the United States government and its local implementers should seek to provide the most concrete and specific priorities, milestones, measurements, and outcomes possible to avoid miscommunication or inflating expectations with local, bilateral, or multinational partners. A lack of a common definition should not be seen as a barrier to cooperation on stabilization. Many UN agencies (e.g., UNDP) have flexibility in funding and comparative advantages that provide an opportunity to build beyond specific bilateral donor efforts. The UN and other international partners may not have the same authority constraints as the U.S. government, and common contextual goals and objectives can be established even in the absence of a unified definition of stabilization. Multilateral institutions—through which many allied countries engage in stabilization contexts—can scale programming and think longer-term; early and regular coordination is critical to longer term stabilization success, as is ensuring accountability for the implementation of assistance. Bilateral partnerships can help drive the political process necessary for stabilization to take root and transition to longer-term development.

SUCCESSFUL BURDEN SHARING

Two recent experiences offer targeted lessons on the benefits of burden sharing and how successful partnerships can be achieved. The first was the Iraq Trust Fund, which included significant contributions by the United States and over 20 other countries. Developed by UNDP (which also administered it), the United States, Iraq, and other countries via their leadership in the field, the fund existed from 2004 to 2013. Its relative success can be attributed to its ability to be agile (not always a defining trait of such efforts), its reflection of the goals of the broader coalition partners, and its dedication to five core design elements: (1) multi-donor funding; (2) Iraqi participation, leadership, and contribution from the start; (3) focus on local priorities; (4) focus on achieving limited, measurable outcomes; and (5) strong leadership and participation by coalition partners. Together, the Iraq Trust Fund was able to achieve greater stabilization outcomes than any U.S. government effort could have alone.
OPERATIONALIZING INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

U.S. embassies and regional stabilization platforms must identify areas of convergence between their stabilization priorities and those of local leaders and international partners to decide upon criteria to target stabilization resourcing. These criteria should be graded, reviewed 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. This iterative dialogue should also include local implementers, staff, international partners, and civil society members to ensure an accurate and current representation of the situation. The dialogue can then identify areas of U.S. and local partner convergence and show how these other players (and other exogenous factors) may affect that convergence over time. Failure to do so could lead to the United States and its local partners basing decisions on a narrow understanding of the conflict environment and the many actors involved.

The United States should conduct a similar, iterative, and evolving assessment of priorities for stabilization with international partners to continually update and refine planning and programming. Executed as early in stabilization effort planning as possible, this mapping should include a comparison of understanding of local partner will and capability, as well as exogenous actor and conflict dynamics that may constrain local partner will and capabilities. These assessments can highlight where the United States and its bilateral partners may be able to leverage comparative advantages in technical expertise and relationships with local actors.

TOOLS, AUTHORITIES, AND RESOURCING

If the United States intends to use stabilization as a process to achieve political outcomes across a range of challenge sets—including securing gains following kinetic operations and building the resiliency of allied and partner institutions—it must review whether it has the appropriate tools, authorities, and resourcing to perform these operations.

REASSESSING THE TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Policymakers and legislators must recognize that stabilization is more than assistance. It involves strategic planning, diplomatic engagement, and civil-military synchronization. While DoD has an institutional culture of strategic planning and USAID possesses rigorous frameworks and assessment models for developing and refining programs, DoS historically has not prioritized strategic planning. While the DoS policy planning staff provides in-depth analysis and direct support for the secretary of state, the regional bureaus hold the most sway in defining the department’s priorities, with functional bureaus providing oversight of a range of technical and programmatic activities under DoS purview. Embassy country teams develop Integrated Country Strategies (ICS) that define priorities and plans for their specific countries. DoS is wisely tying SAR implementation to the ICS development process, putting the responsibility on embassy country teams to define their political objectives for stabilization and how they will leverage stabilization resourcing. DoS, USAID, and DoD selected 11 countries for the first phase of SAR implementation, and the corresponding embassy country teams have been asked to develop stabilization annexes to their ICSs to describe their plans for stabilization. This will inform an interagency map of assistance that can then be deconflicted. Over time, this will help create a demand signal for stabilization resourcing that is country priority-driven and can avoid the establishment of a separate process that would be viewed as an additional burden on country teams that are already overstretched. While no one entity in DoS drives strategic prioritization and connects it to programs
and resourcing across regions or topical focal areas, F and CSO’s co-leadership of SAR implementation can drive the requisite integrated planning and resourcing processes for stabilization in support of embassy and regional bureau needs. In addition, it is still unclear how stabilization will be planned and prioritized for in subnational or transregional contexts.

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The Foreign Service Institute places little emphasis on strategic planning skills in its coursework, and the Foreign Service does not prioritize that skillset. As a result, it will take several years and a concerted shift in organization, training, and culture for DoS—including CSO, the functional entity tasked with leadership, which itself lacks a planning unit—to ably fill its strategic leadership role for stabilization denoted in the SAR. CSO does, however, have significant planning expertise within its staff; if appropriately resourced, it can provide stabilization planning and analysis training to embassies and regional bureaus. DoS does possess excellent diplomats, although worrying trends in recruitment and retention in the last two years may weaken the next generation of U.S. diplomats.

In addition, stabilization is not well understood as a toolset or process across the U.S. government, including among the diplomatic corps. It will take time and prioritization by DoS leadership to inculcate a deeper understanding of the SAR approach. Doing so will require concerted buy-in and leadership from the secretary of state.

The Trump administration has rightly placed strong emphasis on cost effectiveness, measurable results, and a return on investment in stabilization assistance. It is important that implementers use AM&E tools to present results in accurate and meaningful ways to their funding agencies and to the U.S. Congress.

Over time Congress has developed a degree of skepticism vis-à-vis the non-military return on investment to U.S. efforts in stabilization contexts and a lack of confidence that greater delegation to local partners is the right course of action. Implementers—and their funding agencies—should increase engagement and transparency with Congress, understanding and appreciating this desire for stronger metrics and measurable outcomes. The focus should be on “telling the story” in the context of consolidating gains from kinetic operations, building resiliency, and strategic competition. Has local ownership of stabilization been achieved? Are there other state and non-state actors acting as disrupters? Are strategic and process goals being achieved while we count inputs and outputs? Telling these stories will require developing innovative and independent AM&E tools that leverage modern tools and analysis.

Even with effectively told, evidenced-based stories, the balance between oversight and operational autonomy in the field will continue to be a source of tension, particularly given the fluid nature of stabilization environments. A stronger articulation of U.S. administration priorities and planning for stabilization and a deeper understanding by Congressional committee and member staff of stabilization as an accountable yet iterative process will be necessary for SAR implementation to succeed. When complemented by the rigorous AM&E discussed above, confidence among
policy and legislative officials can be increased, particularly if communicated results focus on theory of change, process indicators, and strategic outcomes.

ENSURING APPROPRIATE AUTHORITIES AND FUNDING

Stabilization contexts that require the United States to empower non-state actor partners, particularly when national-level governments are weak or are working in opposition to U.S. political goals, have proven particularly difficult. The United States largely uses ad hoc authorities in these cases, increasing risks of uneven oversight and misalignment of priorities and prompting doubts about transition if governance connective tissue is not woven into regional or national authorities. The United States will increasingly find itself having to engage subnational actors and authorities in fragile states—some of whom have achieved local stability by keeping predatory state actors away—so the administration and Congress must consider creating a framework and set of tools and authorities specifically for engaging subnational actors that instill the appropriate rigor and oversight necessary in the U.S. system.

Implementing the SAR will also require sustained authorizations and appropriations for DoS and USAID, which have been deprioritized by the current U.S. administration even as defense spending has received continued support. Connecting stabilization programming to the strategic competition objectives vis-à-vis China and Russia could boost future funding support. USAID and DoD planners in the Asia Pacific are looking for ways to bolster the resilience of Southeast Asian institutions to Chinese encroachment. Knowing the United States cannot compete with China’s size, speed of project completion, and funding resources, USAID has reframed its messaging and programs to portray U.S. programs as offering self-reliance and empowering sovereignty while Chinese projects cause long-term, binding debt, corruption, state surveillance, and danger to religious minorities. USAID has also developed a system of indicators of a nation’s vulnerability to political coercion, an important step in better understanding, measuring, and formulating strategies to counter Chinese, Russian, and Iranian competitive activities. OTI offers programs and strategies with more flexible funds and localized programs, targeting priority crisis-prone countries. Creating the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization (CPS) will undoubtedly centralize and strengthen USAID’s ability to serve as the lead implementing agency of the SAR.

Civil-military synchronization in the field has improved through the experience of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, resulting in strong relationships and mutual respect among USAID and DoD implementers and operators that bode well for future stabilization efforts. However, sustaining these linkages may grow difficult over time as DoD shifts its investments, military services’ doctrine, and training to focus more on lethality and warfighting. Such linkages could be maintained through regular civil-military exercises and training opportunities if organizations like the Peacekeeping and Stabilization Operations Institute (PKSOI) at the U.S. Army War College survive. DoS, USAID, and DoD should allocate resources and create time and space for such events to keep civil-military synchronization skills sharp. Additionally, the U.S. administration and Congress should review whether DoD has the requisite authorities to support civilian stabilization operations in conflict-prone environments, given recent experience in the counter-ISIS campaign in Syria and Iraq. DoD also should better integrate planning for Section 333 authority security cooperation with allies and partners, Section 127e authority counterterrorism operations with local security partners, and Section 1202 irregular warfare activities with local security partners as tools that can be leveraged in concert with civilian authorities in stabilization contexts—all while also advancing the core U.S. defense objectives of competing vis-à-vis China and Russia, strengthening allies and new partners, and improving readiness.

Implementing the SAR will also require sustained authorizations and appropriations for DoS and USAID.

Though they exist for good reason and are critical in environments with active terrorist organizations, implementers and NGOs have expressed concern that terrorist material support statutes 18 U.S.C. §2339A and §2339B can also hinder the delivery of stabilization programming. There should be a review of these material support statutes in the context of stabilization, clarifying how they are implemented via policy and providing transparency to implementers and civil society organizations on the policy. The U.S. government should also identify opportunities for leveraging the comparative operational flexibility among international partners when necessary to achieve stabilization objectives.
Finally, co-deployment of civilians with the military to conflict areas remains difficult to mobilize quickly. Force protection of U.S. personnel is always the number one priority for U.S. operations. However, in the wake of the tragedy in Benghazi in 2012, well-intended, increased diplomatic security requirements have impeded the ability of civilians to respond expeditiously. Civilian co-deployment with military colleagues enables better information flow and planning, particularly at the operational level. Such co-deployments would require senior leaders—up to the undersecretary level—to adjudicate any differences between policy and security priorities. Co-deployment need not always occur at the tactical level, where security conditions often are more fraught. Creating policies and regulations that allow for this distinction may enable greater opportunities for civilian-military integration in-country.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Effective and conflict-aware stabilization will require unprecedented levels of intra- and inter-agency coordination, increased burden sharing with international partners, and the right tools and authorities. To achieve this, the United States government should pursue:

- **Stabilization as a Political and Strategic Endeavor**: Recognize the strategic and political importance of stabilization and effective, conflict-aware operationalization of the SAR at the highest levels of DoD, DoS, and USAID, without which reform efforts are likely to fall victim to long-standing bureaucratic turf battles. Stabilization is a critical way of consolidating gains following kinetic operations and building allied and partner resiliency to state-based competitors such as China, Russia, and Iran.
  - Designating a DoS official above the assistant secretary-level to drive this imperative across regional and functional bureaus will be vital to the SAR's success. One option could be for this to be led by the undersecretary of state for Political Affairs, especially since the SAR clearly defines stabilization as a political outcome.
  - Placing stabilization expeditionary and negotiation advisors and planners from CSO in DoS regional bureaus, with the ability to rotate to embassy country teams or operational positions with the military, would buttress the lead role of DoS in the SAR's implementation and complement USAID and DoD capabilities.

- **Training and Exercises for U.S. Government Personnel**: Incorporate conflict analysis modules into standard DoS, USAID, and DoD trainings, moving this from a boutique issue only for some people working only in functional bureaus in some contexts to a core cross-cutting issue that all—whether they are placed in regional or functional bureaus—must acknowledge and appreciate. Conduct combined interagency, scenario-based stabilization planning exercises to include field and policy-level actors and, where possible, implementers and civil society actors as well. Sustain institutions that conduct such training and exercises, such as PKSOI.

- **Parallel Planning for Operations and Stabilization**: Incorporate stabilization planning and civilian stabilization experts into early military and counterterrorism planning efforts, rather than as an after-thought.

- **Transparency and Engagement**: Increase transparency and engagement among DoS, USAID, and DoD policymakers, together with those implementing stabilization programming on the ground, should increase transparency and engagement with congressional leaders. Together, policymakers, implementers, and congressional leaders should build trust and clarity around measurable metrics and outcomes. The U.S. government should increase its transparency and engagement with implementers and NGOs on the policies for terrorist material support statutes to enable better planning and mid-course programmatic adjustments.

- **Mapping of Power**: Conduct an initial and regularly updated assessment and mapping exercise of power centers—rather than personalities—in any given stabilization context. Mapping should include motivations and objectives of actors and be used to identify potential local and international partners with whom to share the future burden of stabilization.

- **Co-Deployment**: Create and amend policies and regulations for co-deployment of civilian and military personnel in conflict areas to conduct combined planning and information sharing on stabilization efforts, particularly at the operational level, where security conditions are less severe than at the tactical level. Such mechanisms could be built as a requirement in the review of authorities for stabilization.

- **Authorities Review**: Review whether DoS and USAID have the requisite authorities to cooperate with
international partners and DoD on stabilization. Work toward passing the Defense Support to Stabilization legislative proposal. This would provide DoD with the requisite authorities and small-scale funds to support civilian stabilization operations in conflict-prone environments and how its irregular warfare, security cooperation, and counterterrorism authorities can be knit together with common principles for effective planning and accountability.

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2. Ibid.


4. Significant challenges to SAR implementation remain: there is no systematic way to elevate demand signals from the field; engaging with non-state actors is critical yet complicated; there is little room for failure or innovation; U.S. policy to prevent aid diversion has, over time, impeded assistance delivery to critical areas; and DoD may not have the authorities it needs to intervene in the critical “golden hour” after kinetic operations and before civilian assistance can begin. Dalton, et al., “Pursuing Effective and Conflict-Aware Stabilization.”


6. Department of State, Stabilization Assistance Review.


9. Department of State, Stabilization Assistance Review.

10. There are examples within the U.S. government—Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) at USAID—and outside—the UK aid agency, DfID, closely coordinates contract and technical oversight functions—that could offer better models. The current reality, however, is that much of the funding required for stabilization is not programmed through these more flexible procurement channels.

11. There should be a realization that local demands will not always line up exactly with U.S. strategic objectives; this does not mean that the United States should demand to be understood without building local buy-in. Local actors have certain perceptions about the United States and how it is operating locally. These perceptions should be acknowledged and addressed. For example, USAID project branding requirements are important in many contexts to show U.S. government support for local development; however, this support may not always be welcome, and exceptions should be considered not just for security reasons but in cases where branding may undermine development outcomes.


14. Reforms currently underway at USAID as part of its refocus on the “Journey to Self-Reliance” include development of country roadmaps meant to define USAID’s contribution to a country’s journey and a tool to refine programming based on a series of established metrics. See: https://selfreliance.usaid.gov/.

