

THROUGH the Complex Operations Prism

BY HANS BINNENDIJK AND PATRICK M. CRONIN

It has been over 12 years since the Bill Clinton administration released Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 56, “Managing Complex Contingency Operations.” PDD 56 was issued in May 1997 to direct the institutionalization within the executive branch of lessons learned from such complex operations as Panama, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia. Our recent frustrations in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the deaths of over 5,000 American soldiers and civilians, and multiple trillions of dollars in war-related costs have caused us once again to scrutinize the failures of our approach to complex operations and to reapply ourselves to a better understanding of those operations and the environments they are meant to address.

The military has responded to the challenge with a proliferation of new doctrine and policy aimed at improving performance in complex operations, while civilian agencies have committed to increasing expeditionary capacities and created a “civilian response corps.” Yet the United States still lacks many of the capacities, processes, mechanisms, and resources required to effectively conduct complex operations—those operations that require close civil-military planning and cooperation in the field.¹ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen have been strong advocates before Congress and in the public media of strengthening the civilian agencies. Both have focused attention on this need and transferred defense dollars into civilian programs. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review dedicated a chapter to “building partner capacity.” At least two dozen recent studies document aspects of the civilian capacity gap and recommend remedies. Various directives and statutes have been issued in the past few years that begin to provide partial solutions.

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USAID military health worker gives cholera inoculation to Vietnamese refugee, 1966

Capabilities Lost

Four decades ago in Vietnam, an effective partnership between the U.S. military and civilian agencies supported the so-called pacification program. Programs of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) were important components of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, whose operations were relatively successful against the Viet Cong but were trumped in the end by North Vietnamese regular forces in a massive conventional invasion. In the wake of the fall of South Vietnam, U.S. military and civilian components let this important capacity to conduct complex operations lapse.

Attempts to avoid repeating the Vietnam experience produced restrictive guidelines governing American military interventions and assistance to foreign governments. Doctrines associated with former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and General Colin Powell that emphasized decisive use of overwhelming force had the unintended consequence of undermining skills required for smaller engagements. Military skills associated with stabilization and reconstruction operations withered, while America's Armed Forces became extremely proficient in high-intensity, net-centric warfare. A culture developed within the military that deferred to civilian partners to conduct what came to be known as phase four or postconflict operations.

Rather than developing the capacity to fulfill this role, civilian departments and agencies saw their skills and resources decline in the face of a strong cost-cutting mood in Congress that extended over decades. USAID was compelled to reduce its Foreign Service and Civil Service staff from about 12,000 personnel during the Vietnam War to some 2,000 today. The United States Information Agency (USIA), which had more than 8,000 personnel worldwide in 1996, was decimated and forced to merge with the Department of State—itsself underresourced and understaffed, sometimes having to forego any new intake of Foreign Service Officers. Other civilian departments of government had few incentives to contribute personnel to national security missions.

Filling the Gap

In Grenada and Panama, U.S. military forces provided the personnel for the stabilization and reconstruction efforts. Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 was predominantly military with little role for civilians. The civilian expeditionary capacity gap was noted as early as 1993; PDD 71, “Strengthening Criminal Justice Systems in Support of Peace Operations,” published by the Clinton administration in 2000, states that in Somalia in 1993, “There were not enough civilian personnel to negotiate with the various factions or to assist local village elders in establishing councils and security forces.” The Balkans postwar efforts in the 1990s again called for civilian managers and planners. The civilian response was better than in the past, but the capacity gap was still notable.

The U.S. forces that invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003 had some reconstruction capabilities, but their mission was to capture Baghdad, not to engage in stabilization and reconstruction. Commander of U.S. Central Command

General Tommy Franks, USA, made it clear that he had planned only for the invasion, not for postconflict operations. That mission was left to civilians reporting to the Secretary of Defense, but their number was small, their time to plan limited, and their resources negligible. Hence, in May 2003, when both civilian and military skills were needed to manage postinvasion operations in Iraq, the civilian elements were in short supply. As a result, military forces had to assume responsibilities and perform tasks that are generally thought to be more appropriate for civilian cadres.

In January 2004, National Defense University (NDU) published *Transforming for Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations*, which identified a “stabilization and reconstruction gap.” It called on the military to adapt and develop the skills needed to fill this gap. Reluctantly at first, and under the pressure of two insurgencies, the Armed Forces did eventually comply. In 2005, Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 3000.05, “Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations,” declared that stability operations were a core U.S. military mission to be accorded priority comparable to combat operations. Army occupational specialties were shifted to this new core mission by

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the tens of thousands. New joint operational concepts and field manuals were written on stability operations, counterinsurgency, and irregular warfare. These significant doctrinal developments are reflected in new training

and education programs. In October 2007, the leaders of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard issued a new Maritime Strategy that announced another important change in focus: “We believe that preventing wars is as important as winning wars.” Operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have created a large cadre of officers and enlisted personnel with some of the skills needed for complex

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operations. Additionally, the military Services and DOD have undertaken numerous analytic initiatives to better understand the nature of the global challenges that we face and that require complex operations.

The process of adaptation came much more slowly on the civilian side. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee took the lead, passing several versions of the Lugar-Biden Bill, which created offices and provided funding at the State Department to begin to meet the need. That legislation was finally enacted late in 2008 as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. In 2004, stimulated by the introduction of the Lugar-Biden Bill, the State Department created the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), which in turn drafted National Security Presidential Directive 44, which named State as the lead agency for reconstruction and stability operations overseas. S/CRS made heroic efforts to organize and develop civilian capabilities for complex operations, but the new office was underfunded, understaffed,

and unappreciated within the State Department. Whereas the Defense Department had dedicated tens of thousands of military personnel to these operations, S/CRS had a staff of fewer than 100, most of them detailees. Important efforts by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to pursue “transformational diplomacy” were also underfunded. It is too soon to know what role S/CRS will play in the State Department under Secretary Hillary Clinton; however, the Obama administration’s apparent preference to conduct diplomacy through special envoys such as Richard Holbrooke, Dennis Ross, and Senator George Mitchell suggests a noninstitutional approach to foreign policy priorities, which could well leave S/CRS on the periphery. The Inter-Agency Management System, designed by S/CRS to guide reconstruction and stabilization operations, has yet to be invoked.

Inevitably and necessarily, DOD was forced to fill the overall gap with military resources, personnel, and private contractors. Traditionally, civilian functions were increasingly performed in Iraq and Afghanistan by DOD. Foreign assistance was provided through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program. Provincial Reconstruction Teams, usually dominantly military, implemented local reconstruction projects. Civil Affairs units previously relegated to the Reserve Component and seldom called to Active duty became frontline coordinators. Public affairs, too, became a province of the military, with new strategic communication efforts and military information support teams doing what USIA did in an earlier era. Human terrain teams, guided by cultural anthropologists, provided the kinds of important insights traditionally provided by State Department experts.

These DOD efforts became global. All regional commands developed small interagency civilian cohorts, usually called Joint Interagency

Coordinating Groups. In two cases, U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Southern Command, major efforts are ongoing to strengthen the capabilities of civilians within the commands who are under State Department deputies yet ultimately serve under military commanders. Legislation was enacted to enable global DOD authority to train and equip allies to use DOD rather than State Department funds, thereby reducing State Department policy oversight.

More than a Question of Balance

The imbalanced growth of military and civilian capabilities for complex operations in 2005–2008 caused several problems that underlined the call by DOD leaders for increased resources for their civilian counterparts. First, the imbalance created the impression internationally that American foreign policy was being “militarized.” Second, military personnel performed functions that trained civilian counterparts with reachback to civilian agencies could perform much more effectively. Third, many in the military came to believe that only DOD is at war, not the Nation. Fourth, civilian voices in interagency policy discussions carried less weight because they lacked operational resources. Fifth, as a result, civilian agencies began to balk at the dominant role played by DOD. And sixth, as the prospect of future defense budget constraints became clearer, and ground forces focused almost exclusively on irregular warfare,² some analysts grew concerned that inadequate attention was being paid to preparing for major combat operations.

The laudable steps that have been taken by the civilian agencies, with the full-hearted support of DOD, to correct the imbalance in usable resources for complex operations between the civilian and military agencies are noteworthy. However, there should be no illusion that the problem will then be “solved.” Secretary Clinton

has pledged to increase the numbers of Foreign Service Officers both at State and USAID dramatically in the next few years, but it will be some years at least before the new staff brought into State, USAID, and the other agencies are trained and ready for complex operations.

The unreadiness of the U.S. Government for future complex operations is not just a question of numbers. While the military has done much over the past 8 years in terms of doctrine and training, civilian agencies still lack doctrine, training, or education programs to prepare their expeditionary cadres for complex operations. Neither State nor USAID has institutionalized processes or dedicated resources for analyzing their experience, and the so-called lessons learned process remains underdeveloped. As individuals transition to other positions and vocations, their experience and learning are at risk of vanishing with them. The dismantling of USAID’s Center for Development Information and Evaluation several years ago was highly regrettable and leaves USAID without a capacity to systematically study its own work, identify, articulate, and validate lessons, and recycle them into organizational training. At the State Department, S/CRS has taken up the lessons learned role for stabilization and reconstruction operations, but it has had little opportunity to develop this function. The civilian agencies have taken few initiatives toward improved understanding of complex environments or complex operations. Research and development are not prioritized in the civilian agencies, so tools such as social network analysis and Web-based information-sharing are underutilized.


Policy Options

Several broad options may be considered with regard to U.S. capacity for future complex operations. We can:



- ❖ follow policies that seek to limit the need for complex operations and not develop additional capacity; but while we may be able to avoid wars of choice, such as Iraq, there will likely be other contingencies, small and large, where benign neglect may not be an option.
- ❖ continue to let DOD shoulder the main burden, with military personnel performing essentially civilian functions, augmented, where necessary, by DOD civilians; this is essentially the status quo, and this does not resolve the issues of balance and effectiveness noted above.
- ❖ rely more on civilian contractors; but there are limits to the use of contractors, and the United States may already be exceeding those limits.
- ❖ accelerate efforts to build the capacity of civilian agencies by providing additional resources, creating new authorities, and changing existing interagency structures.

This article recommends pursuing the fourth course of action. What capacity to build, how much of it, and how to organize and manage it are at the center of this discussion. President



Restructuring institutional architecture
for complex operations would strengthen
overseas regional role of State Department
under Secretary Clinton

Obama has pledged “to increase both the numbers and capabilities of our diplomats, development experts, and other civilians who can work alongside our military.” However, candidates pledge many things. Will the Obama administration prioritize this task among all the other challenges the country faces today?

Civilian Surge: Major Findings

The need for a robust and sustainable civilian expeditionary capacity is discussed at length in *Civilian Surge: Key to Complex Operations* (NDU Press, 2009). This section summarizes the major findings presented in that publication.

Complex operations encompass 6 broad categories of missions, with 60 associated tasks, 48 of which in 5 categories are probably best performed by civilians. Five thousand deployable, active-duty government civilians and 10,000 civilian reserves would be needed to perform these 48 tasks on a sustained basis in one large, one medium, and four small contingencies. In today’s global security environment, structuring civilian and military capabilities to meet this 1–1–4 contingency

standard is prudent. This requirement substantially exceeds current executive branch planning assumptions, which call for 2,250 active-duty civilians and 2,000 civilian reservists.

Lead agency and lead individual approaches are inadequate to deal with complex missions involving multiple departments and agencies. One recommendation is to use “empowered cross-functional teams” with sufficient authority and resources to control departmental and agency activities within the scope of specific mandates. The National Security Council’s oversight role also needs to be strengthened.

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DOD has adjusted well to its new complex missions since 2003. In anticipation of constricting defense budgets, the Department needs to invest in high-end military capabilities, and, as a result, it needs its civilian partners to build up their capacity to conduct complex operations. Recently, DOD has enhanced its authorities to deploy its own civilians, should other departments fail to deliver. Plans to organize and train these personnel should be more closely coordinated with similar planning by the State Department.

The State Department should concentrate on developing “stabilization and reconstruction-savvy” diplomats, who should be plugged directly into executive crisis management activities. Key interagency planning and operational functions should be moved out of the State Department to a new interagency coordinator, allowing State to more strategically target its resources for diplomatic readiness needs in

underserved regions. A new, empowered cross-functional interagency team should inherit several of the functions of S/CRS.

USAID should be the operational agency charged with training and equipping civilians for complex missions. This will require doubling its personnel strength and endowing it with new authorities akin to those associated in the past with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and new funding to reimburse other agencies that provide personnel for overseas deployment. USAID also will need to undergo a significant cultural change. To promote that change, and to reflect its new mission, USAID might be renamed the U.S. Agency for Development and Reconstruction (USADR). The reconstituted USAID/USADR might have two basic divisions, one for each major function—development and reconstruction.

Domestic civilian agencies and the Intelligence Community have significant skills that would prove useful to the successful completion of a complex operation. But overcoming bureaucratic, structural, and cultural barriers of domestic agencies may require special legislation. Domestic civilian agencies should be given a statutory mission to participate in overseas complex operations, just as many of them now have with respect to domestic contingencies, as well as modest budget increases to tie their new responsibilities into existing capacity deployment programs. The Intelligence Community is preoccupied with counterterrorism operations, and additional assets are needed to enable greater contributions to complex operations.

While the use of contractors in U.S. military operations has been a constructive factor since the Revolutionary War, the ratio of contractors to military personnel is at an all-time high. This has led to loss of core competencies in Federal departments and agencies, lack

of supervision of contractors, and lower than expected cost efficiencies. Thus, the case is made for dropping the presumption that favors outsourcing civilian tasks in complex operations, instead increasing the government civilian workforce in some agencies and improving contractor oversight.

The Federal Government might reorganize itself to educate and train the many civilians needed for future complex missions. Efforts to provide this education were initiated in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review but have stalled, in part because the demand for new educational programs has not been fully articulated or resourced and is resisted by those departments and agencies in which education has little traditional support. Efforts should be directed to define and develop the learning elements of the emerging national security operations. This will require dedication and a commitment to resourcing across the executive branch and will call for the establishment of a new academic entity for this purpose, possibly at NDU.

The total cost of the required civilian capacity is estimated at about \$2 billion annually. Some of these costs are already embedded in current executive branch budget requests. New approaches, such as a combined national security budget presentation, may be needed to enhance congressional support for these funds.

The necessary civilian capacity should connect to its military counterpart in an overseas operation. Important efforts at civil-military integration and cooperation have taken place within the confines of the military, but these do not address the fundamental problem of the absence of civilian infrastructure to lead U.S. efforts during complex operations. One recommendation is to create new regional Ambassadors' Councils, a surge capacity to absorb interagency influx at key Embassies, and

easier civilian access to military transportation and materiel during a crisis.

Homeland security events, such as the response to Hurricane Katrina and management of the consequences of a major terrorist attack, are also complex operations that require collaboration and skill sets similar to those needed in overseas operations. DOD will likely never be the lead agency in the homeland, given constitutional and legal constraints. Issues of state sovereignty and the unique relationship between a Governor and a state's National Guard—in other than Title 10 status—preclude a traditional command and control relationship, even within the uniformed community. Add Federal/state/local/tribal and even private-sector entities to the mix, and complexity goes off the chart. Nonetheless, the synergies between homeland and overseas complex operations need better development to take full advantage of the similarities.

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Overseas complex operations are seldom undertaken by the United States alone, and the civilian capacities of other nations should be harnessed at an early stage. Key international institutions include the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, European Union, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. Recent experience in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan

indicates that coordination among these institutions has been inadequate and that a comprehensive approach is needed. NATO is seeking to develop such an approach with the European Union, but Turkey and Cyprus tend to veto such cooperation within their respective organizations, to the detriment of ongoing operations. A major effort is needed to address this problem.

Connecting with nongovernmental organizations and having a broad representation of local actors are critical to success in complex operations. In fact, unless we are able to engage effectively with indigenous populations, we cannot achieve the political, social, and economic goals for which the military was committed in the first place. Success may depend on early engagement and planning, enabled by open communications networks with maximum sharing of unclassified information with civilians, an area that needs more emphasis.

Managing Complex Operations

The distinguishing characteristic of complex operations is the compound nature of the challenges they represent. The situations that call for complex operations are not strictly or even primarily military problems; social, economic, developmental, and above all political factors are intrinsic to such operations. A more robust and sustainable civilian expeditionary capacity is thus indispensable if the United States is to significantly improve its performance.

But more is needed than numbers. The institutional architecture for managing complex operations should be dramatically altered. The accompanying chart (facing page) depicts a structure for managing future complex operations that would be more effective. The current lead State Department role in interagency coordination and planning is replaced by an “interagency

coordinator,” a strong, empowered, cross-functional interagency team that reports to the National Security Council. A senior member of the National Security Council is responsible for overseeing this coordinator and field operations. The Departments of Defense and State make major financial and personnel contributions to empower the interagency coordinator.

A reconstituted, enlarged, and refocused USAID/USADR would be the main operational agency to train and equip for complex operations. It would have FEMA-like authorities and resources to reimburse other agencies for their contributions to a specific operation. Domestic civilian agencies and departments would receive new authorities, budgets, incentives, and responsibilities to participate, working closely with the agency. The civilian reserve corps and contractors would report primarily to USAID/USADR and, in certain cases, to domestic agencies.

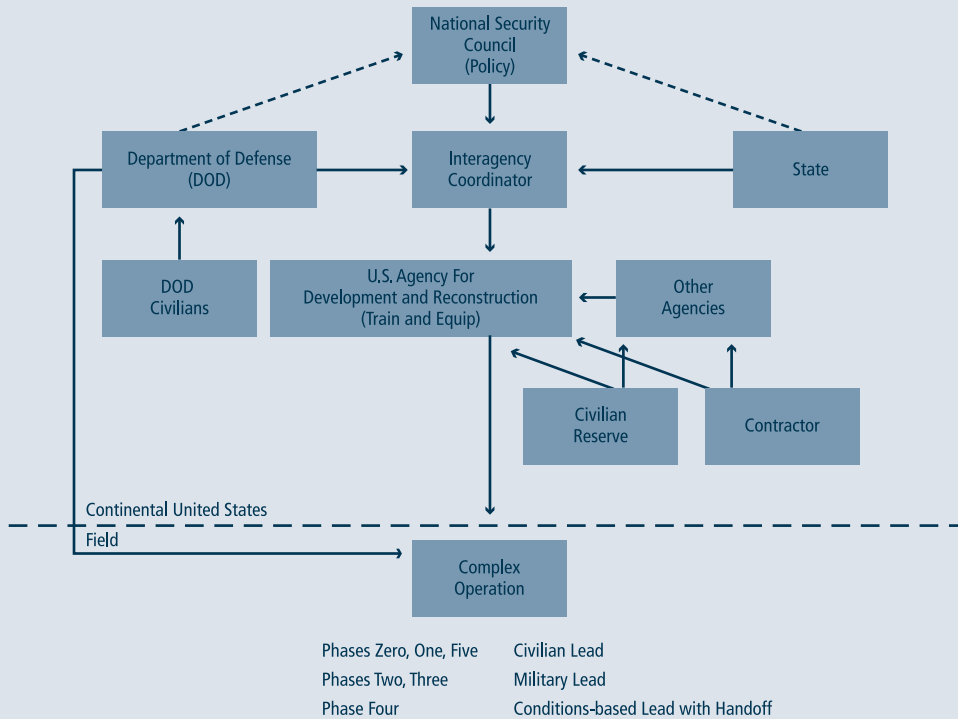
The development of joint, interagency doctrine for complex operations would provide guidelines for future roles, responsibilities, and interaction. The use of doctrine in the civilian agencies is not fully accepted, but that barrier must be overcome if we are not

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to approach every contingency in an ad hoc fashion—which has been the inadequate pattern of the past.

The civilian agencies in particular, but the interagency community as a whole, including the military, must develop a disciplined approach to

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learning the lessons of experience in complex operations. The cost of not learning these lessons is paid in many currencies, including the blood of U.S. soldiers and citizens. State and USAID specifically must take the “lesson learning” responsibility more seriously and dedicate resources to develop institutionalized practices for identifying, articulating, analyzing, and validating lessons learned from experience. These lessons must then be recycled into the training and education process so that experience does not vanish with the individuals who come and go, but informs new generations of U.S. personnel working in complex operations.

Overseas, the regional role of the State Department would be strengthened, and Ambassadors would be in charge of operations in time of peace and deterrence (phases zero, one, and five). Military commanders would take the lead in time of conflict (phases two and three). Command arrangements are most difficult in the immediate postconflict stage (phase four); during this phase, close personal cooperation is required between the Ambassador and combatant commander. Command should shift to civilian leadership as soon as significant combat operations have ended, as decided by the President with the recommendation of the National Security Advisor.

Above all, what is needed is an ongoing dialogue between the military and civilian agencies and within the respective agencies about complex operations and the situations that call for them.

There will likely be a strong tendency to revert to more traditional roles and lanes once the military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan recedes. Military and civilians alike will want to resume the pre–September 11 practices based on so-called steady state models of international relations and development. It is already possible to detect a bit of “complex operations fatigue” in Washington. Yet it is precisely these operations that analysts tell us are most likely in the future. We are still low on the learning curve when it comes to complex operations. There is much to examine, including many of the themes set forth in this article. Future issues of this journal will delve into all the dimensions of complex operations and the complex environments they are meant to address. Indeed, the Center for Complex Operations would like this journal to serve as a prism that breaks complex operations and environments into their constituent elements and to help build a community of practice capable of rejoining these constituent elements into real-life solutions. [PRISM](#)

Notes

¹ The definition of *complex operations* has changed over time—sometimes including combat, sometimes excluding it, sometimes encompassing disaster relief, sometimes not, and usually focusing only on missions overseas. For example, the Center for Complex Operations Web site states that “stability operations, counterinsurgency and *irregular warfare* [are] collectively called ‘complex operations.’” This article adopts a more expansive definition that includes humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, at home and abroad.

² Department of Defense, Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept, version 1.0, September 11, 2007, defines *irregular warfare* as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.” Available at <www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/concepts/iw_joc1_0.pdf>.