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Enhancing U.S. Diplomatic Engagement with Nonstate Armed Groups

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Introduction

The first Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review (QDDR), released by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in December 2010 and titled "Leading through Civilian Power," emphasized the importance of "engaging beyond the state." The QDDR also elevated crisis and conflict resolution to a central national security objective and to a core mission of the U.S. Department of State. These shifts were the culmination of a multiyear effort across two administrations that began with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's "transformational diplomacy" initiative in 2005. The goal is simple if ambitious: broaden the department's mission beyond state-to-state diplomacy to include diplomacy with nonstate actors.

Yet, as the State Department positions itself for a role in preventing and mitigating conflict and beyond working primarily with governments, little work has been done to prepare U.S. diplomats for analyzing and engaging with the most influential nonstate actors and participants in the world's conflicts: nonstate armed groups (NSAGs).[1] Taking into account the basic challenges that confront U.S. engagement with NSAGs, the State Department needs clear guidelines as to why, when, and how its diplomats should conduct such outreach. In addition, several bureaucratic and operations reforms are necessary to allow the State Department to execute its changing mission.

The State Department's Priorities and the Challenge of NSAGs

Recent data on organized violence indicates that since 2008 intrastate conflicts—defined as conflicts between a state and one or more NSAGs—have vastly outnumbered interstate conflicts. The data also show that purely nonstate conflicts—defined as conflicts involving only NSAGs—occur as often as those involving just one government. Furthermore, in 1989, nonstate actors were responsible for 20 percent of one-sided violence. By 2008, that number had risen to 80 percent.[2]

Despite these figures and the implications for U.S. interests, several obstacles have resulted in a gap between the State Department's stated objectives of nonstate engagement and conflict prevention and mitigation and actual engagement with NSAGs. First, these groups are often classified as terrorist organizations or extremist groups by either the United States or by one or more U.S. allies. While all terrorist groups are by definition NSAGs, not all NSAGs are terrorist groups.[3] The State Department, however, has shied away from engagement—or the suggestion of engagement—with many NSAGs to avoid antagonizing a friendly government or conferring legitimacy on an extremist movement, even if the United States has not itself designated those NSAGs as foreign terrorist organizations.

The Obama administration's somewhat conflicting policies on outreach to unsavory governments and NSAGs have further blurred the lines on what is acceptable diplomatic contact. It has also reinforced the State Department's reflexive reticence to engage with groups that the U.S. or other governments may construe as terrorists. In his 2009 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, President Barack Obama argued:

> I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach—condemnation without discussion—can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.[4]

However, Obama has explicitly distinguished between the utility of providing an "open door" to inspire adversarial states to alter their policies and adopting the same tactics to change nongovernmental groups' behavior. In an interview with National Public Radio on June 1, 2009, he explained the difference between engagement with states and engagement with terrorist groups, even those sponsored by the same governments with which the United States was pursuing a dialogue. "Iran is a huge, significant nation state that has, I think, across the international community been recognized as such," said Obama. "Hezbollah and Hamas are not. And I don't think that we have to approach those entities in the same way."

Second, much of the academic literature on NSAGs that could inform diplomatic strategies for working with these groups has focused on two narrow areas of study: engaging with groups that are officially designated as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and negotiating with NSAGs toward a mediated peace agreement. The focus on these topics obscures the importance of the broader and

more fundamental questions posed by examining why, when, and how the United States should establish diplomatic contact with NSAGs. Governments' characterizations of NSAGs (i.e., as FTOs) and efforts to facilitate peace agreements can influence diplomatic strategies toward NSAGs. However, they are not the only factors to consider in developing these diplomatic strategies—or even, in the case of FTO designations, necessarily the most important.

Third, much of the State Department lacks the institutional capacity to engage with NSAGs. Until recent years, Foreign Service officers have seldom been called on to work with nonstate armed groups or, in the few high-profile cases in which engagement has occurred, it has been conducted confidentially, leaving few lessons for today's diplomats.

A Moment of Opportunity?

The necessity of more regular and methodical diplomatic contact with NSAGs is increasingly gaining credibility beyond left-wing advocacy groups, which can provide cover for more innovative U.S. diplomatic strategies. For example, a broad array of experts have attributed, at least in part, the turn of the tide in the Iraq war and the dawn of a phase where U.S. troop withdrawals could be contemplated to U.S. engagement with the insurgents who were open to dialogue. Those experts recognize that, as General David Petraeus has stated, "The big idea is that you can't kill your way out of an industrial-strength insurgency."[5]

In *Foreign Affairs*, Michael Crawford and Jami Miscik contended that:

> [E]ngagement, including contact between mezzanine rulers (groups that have inserted themselves at a level of rule between the government and the people) and Western representatives, will be the only way to differentiate the politically biddable from the irreconcilably die-hard. The current taboo in some Western government against engaging mezzanine rules only reinforces their anti-Western ideology and their constituents' identification with them. . . . It is political engagement and close scrutiny that many mezzanine rulers and their backers, including those in Tehran, fear most. And that is just what the rest of the world should provide them.[6]

Perhaps more significantly, the Obama administration's recent policy shift on dialogue with the Taliban—a group implicitly responsible for the gravest terrorist attack on the United States in its history—may portend new flexibility in the "rules of engagement" with NSAGs.

On February 18, 2011, Secretary of State Clinton gave a groundbreaking speech on Afghanistan that was largely overshadowed by the events of the Arab Awakening. In it, she transformed the three U.S. preconditions for diplomatic engagement with the Taliban into three conditions for an agreement and made a forceful argument for dialogue with an enemy, state, and nonstate alike. "Now, I know that reconciling with an adversary that can be as brutal as the Taliban sounds distasteful, even unimaginable," said Clinton. "And diplomacy would be easy if we only had to talk to our friends. But that is not how one makes peace. President Reagan understood that when he sat down with the Soviets. And Richard Holbrooke made this his life's work. He negotiated face-to-face with Milosevic and ended a war."[7]

Less than four months later, then Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates confirmed that the State Department had opened a direct channel to the Taliban: "We have all said all along that a political outcome is the way most of the wars end. . . . Look, we ended up talking to people in Anbar Province in Iraq who were directly killing—had directly been involved in killing our troops. That's the way wars end." Four days later, President Obama noted, "There are signs that the Taliban may be interested in figuring out a political settlement, which ultimately is going to be critical for consolidating that country."[8]

Irrespective of the ultimate efficacy of talks with the Taliban, these recent U.S overtures may indicate that, under certain circumstances, the United States is willing to contemplate direct diplomatic engagement with NSAGs, even those it has designated as terrorist organizations and who are responsible for the deaths of Americans.

Why to Engage?

If at the political level (as indicated by senior officials' remarks) and at the institutional level (as exemplified by the QDDR) policy is shifting in favor of U.S. contact with NSAGs, the State Department must develop a strategy for determining why, when, and how to engage. Both the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have developed assessment frameworks to lead and structure the analysis of the dynamics of a particular conflict and to inform policy decisions.[9] A complementary methodology, however, does not exist for deciding why it is in the U.S. national interest to engage with an NSAG. Such a methodology is critical to upholding the State Department's emphasis on "engaging beyond the state" and on crisis and conflict resolution in addition to coordinating interagency efforts toward those aims.

A framework for deciding why to engage an NSAG could be based on a three-phase process:

- Developing a profile of the NSAG
- Defining the U.S. objective vis-à-vis the NSAG
- Weighing the costs and benefits of engagement with an NSAG

Any methodology about engaging NSAGs should distinguish between deciding to engage and deciding how to engage; for instance, engagement itself—such as a diplomatic channel—does not necessarily imply negotiations with an NSAG. It is equally important to account for both the domestic and international political environments' bearing on the decision to engage. Opening a channel to Hamas, for example, would have significant ramifications on a variety of constituencies in the United States as well as on relations with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and other U.S. allies in the region. However, rather than an assessment of the political implications serving as the first step in an analytical process for evaluating the rationale for engagement, it should instead be included among a variety of factors determining the costs and benefits of such engagement.

PHASE 1: DEVELOPING A PROFILE

Examining seven fundamental characteristics of an NSAG can help build an understanding of the group and inform a decision about engagement. These characteristics are leadership, military effectiveness, constituency, degree of territorial control, political platform, sponsorship, and needs. Within each characteristic, a checklist of several questions can elucidate the composition of the group. The checklists are not comprehensive but cover the important factors relevant to determining why the United States should or should not engage an NSAG:

- Leadership
    1. Is the leadership unified? If not, what are the factions within the leadership?
    2. Are the political and military wings of the group unified? If not, what is the relationship between these two arms of the group?
- Military effectiveness
    1. How effective is the group militarily?
    2. What are the factors that influence military effectiveness?
- Constituency
    1. Where does the group derive its political support?
    2. Where does the group derive its financial or economic strength?
    3. Is the constituency local (i.e., in the conflict area) or in the diaspora? Both?
    4. What degree of political or financial support does the group maintain among its constituency relative to other political actors?
- Degree of territorial control
    1. Does the group control territory?
    2. If so, is the control of territory semipermanent or transitory?
- Platform
    1. Does the NSAG articulate a clear platform?
    2. Is the platform consistent?
    3. What are the objectives of the platform? Territorial, ideological, religious, ethnic, nihilist, or some mixture?
    4. How does the group justify armed struggle?[10]
- Sponsors
    1. Does the group receive resources or political support from a state or another nonstate entity?
    2. What degree of control or influence does the sponsor(s) exert on the group's political or military strategy?
    3. What are the intersections and divergences between the objectives of the group and those of its sponsor(s)?
- Needs
    1. What are the political needs of the group?
    2. What are the financial needs of the group?
    3. Is the group interested in engagement with the United States?
    4. Will engagement with the United States strengthen or weaken the group's position among its constituency?

PHASE 2: DEFINING THE U.S. OBJECTIVE

The defining question in deciding to open a diplomatic channel to an NSAG is whether the U.S. objective in a particular environment in which an NSAG is an important actor can be achieved through nonpolitical means (i.e., direct or U.S.-supported military intervention). If these means are either unfeasible or insufficient by themselves to achieve the U.S. goal, a political solution is the obvious path.[11]

In most cases, a U.S. role in facilitating a durable political solution will require engagement with an NSAG. In some instances, this engagement occurs pursuant to concessions or policy shifts by the NSAG, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) acceptance of UN Security Council

resolutions 242 and 338, while in others it occurs out of necessity or of a broader U.S. policy shift, such as recent U.S. outreach to the Taliban.

Once policymakers have determined that a political solution is required to achieve a U.S. foreign policy goal, the State Department should refine its initial political objective toward the NSAG. There are eight broad objectives to U.S. engagement with an NSAG. These objectives include

- prevent the emergence of a conflict before it affects the interests of the United States or its allies;
- improve humanitarian access;
- gather intelligence/information;
- change the governing structure of a state, either through regime change because the state is an adversary or through reform because of the legitimate political aspirations of a segment of the population;
- marginalize or weaken the group, for example, by using engagement to foment splinters;
- encourage moderation or transform the group into a nonviolent political party;
- facilitate a peace agreement; and
- prevent a group from spoiling a political process or negotiations.

PHASE 3: WEIGHING COSTS AND BENEFITS

Finally, a methodology for diplomatic engagement with NSAGs should involve a realistic assessment of the costs and benefits of such engagement. Each NSAG—and each conflict—has unique attributes. However, the potential benefits of engagement range across diverse geographic areas and situations. These benefits include

- preventing the outbreak of a conflict that would damage U.S. interests;
- facilitating a political process to address the legitimate grievances of an NSAG, such as marginalization by the central government;
- bolstering the U.S. image among important constituencies;
- facilitating peace negotiations toward an agreement to end a conflict;
- gaining information on the NSAG to better inform U.S. policy decisions;
- reducing tensions with an NSAG sponsor toward which the United States seeks an improved bilateral relationship;
- mitigating violence perpetrated by an NSAG by providing a channel for the expression of grievances through political rather than violent means, undermining its claim that violence is the only path given its diplomatic isolation, or brokering a ceasefire; and
- exploiting fissures within a movement by empowering more pragmatic elements through diplomatic contact, either to neutralize the movement or to shift its platform in line with U.S. foreign policy goals.

It is important to recognize that NSAGs most often emerge in societies and states where major structural problems impede representative and effective governance. As I. William Zartman observes of the most potentially menacing (to the West) group of NSAGs:

> [E]very actual or threatened electoral or nonelectoral takeover by an Islamist movement—beginning with Iran in 1979 and continuing to Algeria in 1991, Afghanistan in 1997, Somalia in 2004, Palestine in 2006, and Egypt in the 2000s—was not the result of a mass religious revival movement but a protest vote against a corrupt and incompetent government.[12]

In light of this, the question for policymakers assessing the benefits of engagement with an NSAG is whether contact would contribute to a process of preventing, mitigating, or resolving conflict over the long term or promoting one of the oft-stated goals of U.S. foreign policy: good governance.

While engagement with an NSAG is never without cost, the engagement framework detailed here is designed to support policymakers in deciding whether the costs are worth the potential benefits. The costs/risks of engagement include

- conferring legitimacy on a group whose aims or tactics the United States views as anathema to its interests;
- undermining the legitimacy of the state(s) in which the group operates or eroding the state's ability to govern;
- empowering a particular ethnic, religious, or sectarian group represented by the NSAG over another group with whom it is competing;
- creating a precedent for violence as a means of gaining international recognition;
- providing an opportunity for an NSAG to enhance its military capacity while engaging in a diversionary dialogue with the United States; and
- triggering U.S. domestic opposition to engagement that undermines support for the policy.

Given the difficulty of developing a functional data set, there is no conclusive study comparing the successes or failures of U.S. engagement with NSAGs. However, policymakers contemplating an increased role for the State Department in conflict mitigation and prevention should consider that, since the 1980s, the number of conflicts that ended with a peace agreement is four times higher than the number of conflicts that ended through military victory.[13] The data suggests nonpolitical means of conflict resolution are far less effective than political dialogue. Given the preponderance of NSAGs in today's conflicts, contact may, in fact, be more effective than isolation or military action.

That said, some data suggests that policymakers should remain cognizant of the limits of contact with an NSAG. While not all NSAGs are terrorist groups (and therefore studies of terrorist groups are not fully applicable to predicting the outcome of engagement with all NSAGs), research has shown that negotiations alone rarely end a terrorist campaign. In a groundbreaking study drawing on a database of hundreds of terrorist organizations since 1968, Audrey Kurth Cronin concluded:

> [N]egotiations carry with them many benefits; however, instantaneously ending the violence is not one of them. . . . The most likely result for a government that chooses to negotiate and can withstand domestic pressure is long-term management of the threat over a lengthy period of gradual demise of the terrorist campaign, while other factors lead to its end.[14]

The decision on why to engage should therefore be based on the likelihood of contact achieving the U.S. objective in any particular case. The three-phase process is designed to provide policymakers with a method for making this assessment. Two general examples may provide clarity on this point.

In the first example, an interagency team led by the State Department determines that, under Phase 1, an NSAG's leadership is too diffuse to identify a reliable and empowered interlocutor for contact and that the group holds little or no territory, espouses a nihilist agenda, and views armed struggle as an integral part of its identity. Under Phase 2, the U.S. objective is to eliminate the group. Under Phase 3, domestic opposition to engagement is likely to be high. Al-Qaeda is the most obvious group to fit this profile and would clearly not make a good candidate for diplomatic contact.

In the second example, the team determines under Phase 1 that another NSAG has a preeminent leader and maintains a plurality—if not a majority—of support among the part of society that it claims to represent. While it espouses a combination of territorial and ideological objectives, it has indicated a willingness to reevaluate its justification for armed struggle under certain conditions. In Phase 2, the U.S. objective is to address humanitarian conditions, enhance its own understanding of the group, and potentially facilitate a peace agreement that ends the conflict. The establishment of U.S. relations with the PLO is one historical example of when, under Phase 3, the potential for progress on a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict outweighed the risks posed by conferring U.S. legitimacy on the PLO.

When to Engage?

In many cases, U.S. engagement with an NSAG has been governed more by near-term American timelines than by whether or not the timing of the engagement is best suited to achieving U.S. objectives over the longer term. As a RAND Corporation official noted with respect to nationalist terrorist organizations (NTOs):

> [T]he United States will engage an NTO only in the absence of preferred interlocutors and when it believes that the NTO is moderating. In addition to these two necessary conditions, a catalyst seems to be needed to alter the expected utility of engagement, pushing a reluctant U.S. administration to adopt this politically and strategically risky policy.[15]

The benefits of developing and utilizing a methodology to inform why the United States should pursue contact with an NSAG include altering this trend, placing U.S. diplomacy in a more proactive position commensurate with its objective of conflict prevention and mitigation, and increasing the chances of success once engagement is underway.

The results of an assessment conducted with the framework will be the principal driver of the decision about when to engage. However, the relative militancy and the willingness of an NSAG to compromise or change its position on the main issues will be affected by factors other than engagement with the United States. Irrespective of which of the eight broad categories of U.S. objectives toward an NSAG are dominant in a particular case, in most, if not all, instances achieving U.S. aims will require a shift in the attitudes, tactics, and strategy by the NSAG. However, any evolution of the NSAG's modus operandi, if it occurs, is a long-term proposition.

Policymakers must therefore bear in mind the distinction between engagement with an NSAG and negotiation with an NSAG, with the former offering fewer prospects for tangible examples of success in the near term. That said, contact is the precursor to facilitating a political settlement to any conflict, so investing in contact with an NSAG—even when negotiations are unlikely—can yield success over a longer time horizon.

Research into dealing with extremist or armed groups has identified several indicators for evaluating when an NSAG may be most receptive to diplomatic engagement that could lead to a political compromise. One measure is the ratio within the NSAG of grievances to commitment to armed struggle, as explained by Zartman.[16] If the grievances and commitment are in balance, the potential for constructive engagement is higher than if the group's commitment to armed struggle has outpaced its determination to have its grievances addressed and instead has become an end in itself.[17]

In cases in which the objective is to facilitate a peace agreement involving at least one NSAG, Zartman's concept of "ripeness"—i.e., the moment when a conflict has reached a "mutually hurting stalemate"—may also be a useful indicator. Engagement with an NSAG toward a peace agreement is likely to be most effective when the movement has recognized that its objectives cannot be achieved solely through military means. Conversely, when no mutually hurting stalemate exists and an NSAG

believes a military campaign can achieve its objective, it is less likely to engage sincerely in negotiations toward an agreement.

Not surprisingly, a group's actions can indicate receptivity to constructive engagement. In addition to recognition that the group's aims cannot be achieved solely through violent means, several other factors present opportunities for engagement. These include the control of territory over time and the establishment of systems within that territory and a view that the settlement of a conflict will bring economic benefits, proper treatment of civilians, and troop discipline. By contrast, a group's disregard for the rule of law and elections, ethnic cleansing, destruction of territory, segregation from the larger social context, minimal command and control of forces, and indiscriminate violence, among other factors, indicate that engagement is less likely to yield results.[18]

Overall, policymakers will have to weigh whether a delay in engagement until "conditions" are ideal risks making the perfect the enemy of the good. At best, delay could reinforce a political stalemate; at worst, it could lead to further erosion in the potential for engagement, however limited, and therefore for achieving U.S. objectives. The debate on U.S. engagement with the Taliban illustrates the difficulty in developing precise criteria on timing. Some officials, most notably Secretary of Defense Gates, have argued that engagement should only occur after coalition forces weaken the insurgency. Others have pointed out that, based on this logic, the Taliban are unlikely to reciprocate with a dialogue when the United States is prevailing militarily. The question then returns to whether the United States can achieve its objective in Afghanistan through solely nonpolitical (i.e., military) means. If not, then attention should focus on how to bring the Taliban to fruitful talks rather than whether or when to do so.

Finally, the decision of when to engage need not be a binary choice; use of an analytical framework can instead inform a choice between engaging directly and engaging indirectly. The State Department has some experience in using nongovernmental organizations to establish initial contact with NSAGs that then pivots to official diplomatic engagement, for example, in the preliminary outreach to the Darfur rebel movements in 2004. Similarly, the intelligence community has on occasion laid a foundation for later diplomatic relationships with NSAGs led by the State Department. However, in cases in which an NSAG does not reject direct engagement with the United States, the determination to use nonstate channels to initiate contact has often been made in an ad hoc manner or as a result of a perceived (or actual) lack of capacity within the State Department.

Rather than deferring to external organizations to engage NSAGs, an analytical framework can support policymakers in deciding which vehicle—direct versus indirect engagement—best achieves U.S. objectives. Such a process—coupled with a presumption that the State Department should most often take the lead on engagement with NSAGs—would also be more consistent with the principles of the QDDR. In the case of NSAGs that are designated as FTOs, direct rather than indirect engagement may also be less risky from a legal perspective (though the political consequences may be more significant). While nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that receive U.S. government funding, are constrained in their work with FTOs, there is no legal restriction on official diplomatic engagement with such groups.

How to Engage?

If the State Department finds itself increasingly called on to engage with nonstate armed groups in order to achieve U.S. policy objectives, a framework for determining why and when to do so is crucial. Such a framework will not, however, address some of the institutional deficiencies that make executing such engagement difficult. These deficiencies fall into two primary categories: bureaucratic and operational.

Bureaucratically, the QDDR has charged the proposed Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) to shepherd State Department efforts at crisis management and conflict resolution. For any engagement with NSAGs in mitigating conflict to succeed, the interaction between the new bureau and the six regional bureaus with primary responsibility for the development of policy and the management of U.S. embassies must be streamlined.

Since the inception of the proposed bureau's precursor, the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), in 2005, competition over policy direction and implementation between S/CRS, the regional bureaus, and other offices in the State Department has often impeded sustained and effective interventions in conflict environments. The innate sensitivity of and unique challenges posed by NSAGs will require that State Department leadership hold the regional bureaus accountable for adopting the tenets of "engaging beyond the state" and crisis and conflict resolution as core missions rather than leaving those aspects of foreign policy to be handled by CSO or other State Department offices. Similarly, the regional bureaus must take the lead in any efforts to evaluate and then develop strategies for engaging NSAGs. While CSO can advise and consult based on its broad expertise in conflict, the regional experts and embassies in the field must be the drivers of the process to determine why and when to engage an NSAG, and then to balance that engagement with more traditional diplomacy vis-à-vis host governments. The leadership of the regional bureaus and embassies—rather than CSO—is important because they will be the most knowledgeable about the political situation and the actors involved, and because it will ensure they buy into the policy.

Operationally, the State Department must institute a structure that encourages and supports Foreign Service officers in developing the skills necessary not only to deal in conflict situations but specifically to engage with nonstate actors. If the vision of the QDDR is to be realized, Foreign Service officers' career advancement must be predicated on their ability to execute the priorities of U.S. policy, which, based on the QDDR, will involve broadening their skills beyond managing government-to-government relations, writing cables, and delivering traditional demarches. Some have suggested that a new career track (called "cones" in State Department parlance) be created to develop specialists in nontraditional diplomacy. However, if the State Department is to remain a relevant institution, the Foreign Service as a whole—not just a limited number of particularly expeditionary diplomats— must be able to operate effectively in the current geopolitical context.

At the same time, the State Department's leadership must be accountable for reforming the training regime to prepare diplomats for these tasks. Foreign Service officers only encounter the wealth of research and academic studies on conflict management, nonstate actors, civil wars, insurgencies, and

negotiations through their own study and rarely, if ever, through official training programs. At present, courses on conflict management are infrequent and not mandatory, and no training programs exist for educating Foreign Service officers on these issues or on engagement with nonstate actors more broadly. From Congo to Colombia, it is often the most junior officers who are charged with engaging with nonstate groups. While on-the-ground, practical experience is invaluable, the State Department must invest in providing Foreign Service officers with the intellectual foundation to pursue more dynamic diplomatic initiatives. The Foreign Service Institute should be charged with leading this effort.

Most Western diplomatic services are similarly behind the curve in training their diplomats for twenty-first-century political realities. However, while the United Nations of course has a different mandate and different objectives than the State Department, the UN Department of Political Affairs has begun to institutionalize training on engagement with NSAGs and other nonstate actors based on lessons learned from peacekeeping and humanitarian missions around the globe. This effort could provide an initially strong model and set of resources for the State Department to reform and update its own diplomatic training programs.

Conclusion

Foreign policy leaders, including those in the State Department, as well as international affairs experts increasingly recognize the importance of diplomatic contact beyond governments and of regular diplomatic involvement in conflict mitigation and prevention. However, because the State Department lacks any process for developing strategies to engage NSAGs and its diplomats seldom have the skills to execute such engagement in any case, efforts to advance U.S. interests in a world in which nonstate actors play a pivotal role lag behind the United States' stated policy objectives.

As the Obama administration works to implement the QDDR, the State Department should develop a formal analytical framework—rather than an ad hoc process—to plan for official engagement with NSAGs in different contexts as well as to implement structural reforms to mitigate bureaucratic competition and prepare diplomats to operate in more complex environments.

Endnotes

1. The International Council on Human Rights Policy defines nonstate armed groups as those that are "armed and use force to achieve their objectives and are not under state control."

2. Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3. No internationally accepted definition of a terrorist group exists, and the purpose of this paper is not to wade into the highly complex and subjective debate on that topic. It is important to note, however, that U.S. diplomatic contact with foreign terrorist organizations (as designated by the secretary of state) is not proscribed by U.S. law.

4. President Barack Obama, Remarks at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize.

5. Mitchell B. Reiss, *Negotiating with Evil* (New York: Open Road, 2010).

6. Michael Crawford and Jami Miscik, "The Rise of the Mezzanine Rulers," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 6, November/December 2010, pp. 123–32.

7. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society's Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses, New York, NY, February 18, 2011, http://ww.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm.

8. President Barack Obama, Remarks to Soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division in Fort Drum, New York, June 23, 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/23/remarks-president-soldiers-10th-mountain-division-fort-drum-new-york.

9. See the "Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework" produced by the State Department Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/161781.pdf) and "Conducting a Conflict Assessment: A Framework for Strategy and Program Development" produced by USAID (http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/conflict/publications/docs/CMM_ConflAssessFrmwrk_May_05.pdf).

10. For a further discussion of the importance of understanding how a group accounts for being armed and the impact of the "militant mindset," see both Sue Williams and Robert Ricigliano, "Understanding Armed Groups," and Clem McCartney "From Armed Struggle to Political Negotiations," *Accord 16: Choosing to Engage* (London, UK: Conciliation Resources, 2005).

11. Sanctions, a commonly used policy prescription for achieving U.S. objectives toward NSAGs, are one of a variety of tools, albeit economic, that can be used for a political purpose. However, sanctions in isolation have rarely succeeded in achieving U.S. policy objectives toward NSAGs. Instead, they have proven to be more effective when used as one component of a broader political strategy.

12. I. William Zartman and Guy Olivier Faure, *Engaging Extremists: Trade-Offs, Timing and Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011), pp. 11–12.

13. Human Security Report 2009/2010: *The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War* (Vancouver, Canada: Human Security Report Project, 2010).

14. Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 71.

15. Stacie L. Pettyjohn, "U.S. Policy Toward Nationalist Organizations: Isolate or Engage," *Engaging Extremists: Trade-Offs, Timing and Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011), p. 140.

16. I. William Zartman, *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), pp. 9–10.

17. The ratio of grievances to commitment to armed conflict may vary among factions within an NSAG. As noted, under Phase 1 of the engagement methodology, analysis of the factions—including based upon the grievance/commitment ratio—will be critical.

18. Sue Williams and Robert Ricigliano, "Understanding Armed Groups," Accord 16: Choosing to Engage (London, UK: Conciliation Resources, 2005). For additional analysis of the rationale for and challenges of engaging armed groups, as well as case studies, see also Teresa Whitfield, "Engaging with Armed Groups: Dilemmas and Options for Mediators" (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2010).

About the Author

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