



# The Obama Administration's "3D" Foreign Policy: Hopes and Cautions for Civil Society and Conflict Prevention

Lisa Schirch

In her 2009 Congressional testimony, the then new U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced her intention to pursue a "3D" foreign policy using a multidimensional toolkit of development, diplomacy, and defense. Secretary Clinton laid out a convincing argument that the US military could not achieve security without robust diplomatic and development efforts to address underlying political and economic grievances fueling violence. Secretary Clinton's leadership in the Obama Administration offers both hopes and challenges to a country

entangled in a military industrial complex with a foreign policy trying to catch up to rapidly shifting international trends where threats from non-state actors and weak states far outpace threats from strong states. New initiatives to bolster attention to conflict prevention and civil society peacebuilding offer hope. But these approaches face significant challenges in a country where corporate profiteers intent on bending Congress to a weaponized and aggressive foreign policy diminish attempts at a foreign policy logic that does not rely on firepower.

## US Policy and Conflict Prevention

Secretary Clinton made conflict prevention and response a “core mission” of the U.S. Department of State and USAID in the 2011 Quadrennial Development and Diplomacy Review (QDDR), a first ever report on the status of US capacities to relate to the longstanding Quadrennial Defense Review. The QDDR restructured the State Department, including the creation of a new Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Maria Otero who oversees a variety of new initiatives and structures such as the new Bureau on Conflict Stabilization Operations. Under Secretary Otero also oversees the State Department’s efforts in response to the newly established Atrocities Prevention Board in response to President Obama’s directive to develop a Whole-of-Government effort to identify and address atrocity threats.

The QDDR outlines a more robust focus on civilian security and the protection of individuals. The State Department defines “Civilian Security” as helping countries build just societies that are grounded in democratic principles that guarantee respect for human rights and that apply the rule of law. The State Department notes that while “Civilian Security” is a new term within the State Department lexicon, it is not a new goal, but there are new structures to help achieve that goal of promoting, in their terms, “just societies.”

As the State Department launches new programs to support conflict prevention, it remains unclear as to what they understand about conflict prevention. For much of the last thirty years, civil society organizations developed conflict prevention approaches that aimed

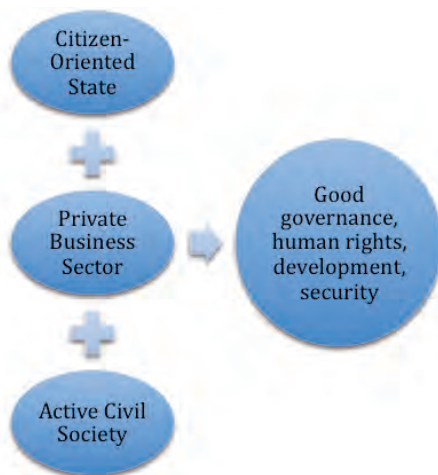
to involve government in state-society partnerships to develop an architecture or infrastructure for preventing violent conflict. New US State Department initiatives to conceive of and relate to civil society are essential to any successful conflict prevention efforts.

## US Policy and Civil Society

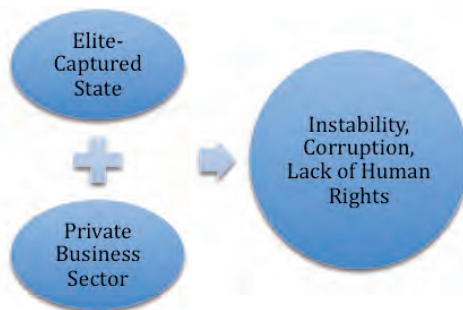
President Obama's own background in community organizing impacted his Administration's conceptualization of civil society and their role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In the past, US policy more often either ignored civil society's role in preventing, managing, and recovering from violent conflict or it has systematically excluded and suppressed civil society efforts to foster change through a policy of "pacification" where civil society experiences violent repression for any effort to participate democratically.

This historic lack of understanding of civil society led to U.S. nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the US devoted resources to bolster widely unpopular governments in both countries which virtually ignored civil society. Like the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration failed to understand the nature of state-society relations and the need to support an active civil society that could hold their own government in check. The Obama Administration belatedly began to realize that it was impossible to impose development or democracy plans onto local "host" nations.

Secretary Clinton seems to recognize that the U.S. needs to work in partnership with people abroad to develop homegrown forms of democracy and locally guided development. Security and stability require a combination of a citizen-oriented state held to account by an active civil society. In 2012, Secretary Clinton launched a one-year "Strategic Civil Society Dialogue" designed to listen to popular and influential civil society leaders from countries such as Egypt, Yemen and Afghanistan. In Secretary Clinton's words, there are three essential components to democratic and stable societies: citizen-oriented states, private business sector, and an active civil society.



The logical conclusion to this theory is that elite-captured states that serve the interests of a private business sector, but ignore or repress civil society result in corrupt governments, human rights violations and unstable, violent societies.



The Obama Administration's articulation and recognition of civil society's role in conflict prevention, stabilization and democratization is laudable. But the seeds of change need more attention. Too many policymakers in the US and abroad still resort to pacification of civil society. For example, Global War on Terror legislation illustrates a fundamental distrust of all civil society organizations as it makes it illegal for civil society organizations in the US and many other countries to engage with armed groups to train them in negotiation or human rights. These policies ignore historical evidence shoring that

civil society organizations play critical roles in bringing armed groups to a negotiation table that leads to a cessation of violence.

Even today, US policy in Iraq and Afghanistan has few mechanisms for listening to Afghans or Iraqis express their own views on US policy. Ironically, the US desire to foster democracy in these countries overlooked the most important strategy: “democratic policymaking” where the people impacted by US policy have a voice in shaping US policy. Instead, USAID invites civil society organizations to be “implementing partners” to carry out projects designed in Washington aimed to help bring stability abroad. But very rarely are local civil society organizations invited to take part in conflict assessment processes where they articulate their often vastly different understanding of the drivers and root causes of conflict. Using civil society as “implementing partners” is only a small improvement on pacification techniques.

In order to fully align the US State Department’s formula for stable, democratic states, US foreign policy should begin to create an infrastructure for a more democratic policymaking where the voices of civil society in every country abroad help to shape US policy in that country. Without these channels, both the US government and local governments in these countries are elite-captured: serving the interests of the wealthy, but ultimately setting the foundation for inequality, human rights violations, corruption and instability.

## **The Challenges of Balancing Development, Diplomacy and Defense**

Despite the Obama Administrations new structures and initiatives supporting a 3D approach, a US foreign policy based on conflict prevention and robust support for civil society faces immense challenges.

Ideally, a 3D foreign policy keeps the integrity of each approach without blending development, diplomacy, and defense together; pulling government personnel from State Department, Defense Department and USAID outside of their silos to think and talk together. But in order for development and diplomacy to be effective, U.S. agencies need to ensure that the Pentagon does not dictate development and

diplomacy policy, nor ask military soliders to carry out development tasks on the ground in an effort to win short-term goodwill from local people. Conflict prevention efforts involving development diplomacy require a long-term focus on building relationships and addressing root causes of violence. Diplomacy should draw on principled negotiation techniques rather than a coercion that too often sounds like "if you don't do what we tell you to do, we will bomb you." But a US 3D approach does not include safeguards from preventing the Pentagon from engaging or leading all three "Ds".

In terms of their budgets, staffing and links with Congress, the Pentagon far outweighs the power of the Department of State and USAID. Secretary Clinton needs to address the vast inequities in U.S. budgets for development, diplomacy, and defense. The military budget is too big and full of waste. The development and diplomacy budgets are too small and contain too many earmarks for special interests and program restrictions set by Congress. A new foreign policy is not possible without matching a 3D strategy to smarter resource planning.

The U.S. military budget surpasses the military expenditures of all other countries combined. The Defense Department's proportion of U.S. development funds jumped from 6% to almost 25% in the last few years. Without shifting security dollars from the Defense Department over to the State Department and USAID, the military will be the U.S.'s default foreign policy tool. Even Secretary of Defense Gates chastises Congress' underfunding of U.S. civilian agencies. The United Kingdom, Canada, and other countries reflect their commitment to civilian expertise in development and diplomacy with budgets to match.

Congress continues to allow the Department of Defense to use USAID and State Department programs and budgets toward short term counter terrorism efforts aimed at an winning hearts and minds that is overly-simplistic and largely without evidence that it works. Development and diplomacy require a patient, long term approach to address poverty and build good governance in fragile states. Instead, Congress needs to safeguard the State Department and USAID's medium and long-term programs from short term demands. In addition, the US government needs to add a cabinet-level position to protect U.S. interests in fostering global development. Without a high-level advocate, development funds are often diverted toward aiding oft-

corrupt governments in exchange for their short-term cooperation with the U.S.

At its best, a 3D foreign policy will create a more effective “first resort” to address global conflicts and crises through development and diplomacy. These preventive approaches will save lives at home and abroad. They will also save money, easing the current over-reliance on the expensive and dangerous “last resort” of military defense. But getting to this ideal will require a much more thoughtful government approach to overcoming the many obstacles to progress.